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Turkey's Euro-vision

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Every country claims that it possesses a unique geography and Turkey is certainly no exception. There are, however, some specific reasons behind Turkey's claim to uniqueness. Is Turkey in Europe or Asia? Is it part of the Islamic or Western world? Should it pursue policies to become a member of the European Union or should it turn back to its Ottoman heritage? The answers to these questions are contested and uncertainty about Turkey's identity and its place in the European state-system is pervasive. Turkey's unique geography has been shaping its historical role and relative political importance in international relations.¹ Turkey has borders with Bulgaria and Greece in the Balkans; Iran, Iraq and Syria in the Middle East; and the new republics of the former Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus. Turkey is a peninsula surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. It has historical and cultural connections with the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East. This location has played a determining role in its strategic importance international relations.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States of America, Turkey's importance gained a new dimension in terms of mediating between Islamic and Western values.

I am going to begin by challenging three dominating discourses of Turkey's relations with Europe during and after the cold war.

1. It is not a bridge between Europe and Asia, because it is a Eurasian country. "In geographical, political and cultural terms, Turkey rests along an axis where [Europe and Asia] blend."² Both Russia and Turkey share similar historical and geographical dimensions. Turkey is close to Central Asia and there is nothing wrong with having Asian values and identities.

2. It is not a country torn between Islam and the West as Samuel Huntington argues in *The Clash of Civilisations*, (Article in 1993, Book in 1996 - “The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future.”) On the contrary, Turkey is a historically and culturally rich country with a unique sociological experience.
3. It is not a state of pivotal importance for US strategy - as Paul Kennedy and other American scholars might hope (Article in 1996, Book in 1999 - “It is vital that America focus its efforts on a small number of countries whose fate is uncertain and whose future will profoundly affect their surrounding regions. These are the pivotal states. The classic example of a pivotal state throughout the nineteenth century was Turkey, the epicentre of the so-called Eastern Question; because of Turkey’s strategic position, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire posed a perennial problem for British and Russian policymakers.” According to these American scholars the other pivotal states are, Algeria, Egypt, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Indonesia Mexico and Brazil.)

Instead, Turkey is a middle power, which has to realise it is capable of bringing Europe, Mediterranean the Middle East regions and the Caucasus together for its own national interests.

To begin with, the point of departure in my paper is that, Turkey and the Ottoman Empire are not the same entities. The identity of the state was the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. From Turkish scholars perspective, Turkey refers only to the contemporary Turkish Republic, not the Ottoman Empire. Secondly, modern Turkish state-builders inherited an ‘identity crisis’ from their predecessors, and they sought to solve this crisis through the construction of a secular nation-state on the basis of European model - hoping that Turkey would become an equal member of

European international society, unlike the Ottoman Empire. The question arises at this juncture: did they succeed? Why are there problems in Turkish-European relations?

In order to answer these questions we have to understand three important factors in Turkish-European relations: (1) The European identity was defined against the Ottoman Empire, as ‘the other’. (2) Turkey is located at the margins of Europe, which makes its geopolitics problematic. (3) The Turkish-European relations are based on the politics of exclusion and misperceptions.

1. The ‘otherness’ of the Ottoman Empire in European International Society

“Like national or ethnic identity, European identity is an historically constructed, historically variable, historically moulded chosen collective identity.”³ In this context, I argue that European identity, like any other collective identity, developed itself in relation to the existence of the ‘other.’ Accordingly, the Ottoman Empire was one of the ‘others’ until the nineteenth century, like China and Japan.

One can argue that the Ottoman Empire was, empirically, a European state. However, “[t]he paradox is that it was not. Even though a significant portion of the Empire was based *in* Europe, it cannot be said to have been *of* Europe.”⁴ According to Holbraad, the Ottoman Empire was never really part of international society since it was “geographically marginal, culturally alien and historically hostile.”⁵ The Ottoman Empire had a different socio-political organisation - its *millet* system, and a different religion than European states. For the West, the Ottoman Empire was an alien ‘other’, a non-Western alien society, which had different principles of existence and values from those of Europe.⁶ The Ottoman Empire was never accepted as a great Western power, indeed it was never regarded as Western by European powers. This caused the dilemma of

*being part of a European international system but not being member of European international society.*⁷ It wasn't until the late fifteenth century that the Empire began to get involved in Europe's affairs. It was then that Turkey was drawn into alliances with Western powers in order to help the Italian city-states against their enemies.⁸ The Ottoman Empire was the only state which did not 'know its place' in the hierarchy of European powers. Although it had extensive possessions in the Balkans and the Treaty of Paris of 1856 formally admitted it to the Concert of Europe, it was never regarded as a European state.⁹ Being a formal part of the Western system in 1856 did not mean that it was an active member as well.

Most analyses of the Ottoman Empire's status in international society are generally presented from the perspective of both Western states and Western scholars. The result is that the Ottoman Empire was not regarded as a European state. But there is another side of the coin as well: the rulers of the Empire did not want to be a member of the international society of European states, particularly at the height of its power. Its self-identity was that of the 'protector' of the Muslim world against the 'infidel' Christian world. Arguably, the Ottoman sultans considered themselves superior to their Western counterparts and chose to exclude the Empire from the European society of states. Although the Ottoman Empire accepted Western ambassadors to Istanbul at certain times for limited periods, Ottoman ambassadors were not sent to Western states until the eighteenth century, demonstrating that they did not understand such exchanges to be reciprocal. However, as a consequence of the decline of the Empire, its policies had to be changed in order to gain Western allies. When the Ottoman Empire was drawn into the politics of European states and reluctantly decided to become a member of international society, it was not easy for either European states or the Ottoman Empire to define the Empire's identity and place within this society. Despite the fact that many Western scholars regard the relationship

between the European states and the Ottoman Empire as the longest and most equal of all European relations with external actors, they fail to acknowledge the fact that European identity developed in relation to the existence of the Ottoman Empire as the dangerous ‘other.’¹⁰ As Martin Wight point out “the politics of the defence of Europe against the Turks were religious politics. ... The rulers of the West regarded the Turks with fear and disgust, as a barbarian intruder, and revived the idea of a crusade to deliver the Balkans and the Near East from the infidel.”¹¹ From the Ottoman point of view, the West was also the ‘other’ (*kafir* –infidel) in terms of its religion and different socio-political structure. However, to use religion to explain the Turkish identity crisis might be an oversimplification, which bears the danger of taking us to the *Clash of Civilisations* argument.

2. The problematic nature of Turkey’s geographical location

In addition to religion, I argue that history and geopolitics play an important role in the political identities of all countries.¹² One of the determining factors of this ambiguous status and identity crisis is its existence in between regions. The Ottoman Empire extended to 3 different continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. The modern Turkish state also inherited this multi-faceted geography. Turkey has historical and cultural connections with the 3 different regions: the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East. This location creates anxieties about not belonging to a region. Thus, its geographical location, which cannot be placed “into any of the neat geographical categories,” also creates problems for its relations with Europe: it is a European country as well as a Middle Eastern and Mediterranean one.¹³ Turkey is located at the crossroads of international politics and in an area of the world where Eastern and Western ways of life and interests overlap.¹⁴ This external environment has helped shape the country’s identity. Turkey’s

unusual problem has been that Turkey does not belong to a region, because it is between regions. It is close to having a European identity, but there is no cultural link between Turkey and the Western states. Similarly, although located in the Middle East, it does not have cultural links with this region's peoples either.

Therefore, Turkey's socio-cultural differences from the West and its neighbouring states contribute to its otherness in different regions. It is geographically in the Middle East but it does not share the same social or economic background or cultural identity with the regional states.¹⁵ Historically, There is "a deep sense of inferiority and bitterness" among the Arab states towards Turkey because of Ottoman rule.¹⁶ Economically, Turkey is not an oil-rich country like most other Middle Eastern states. Socially, it is much more secularised and Westernised, and it is linguistically different from the Arab states. In fact, from a cultural identity perspective, especially in terms of language, the Central Asian region shares more common features with Turkey than with the Middle East. However, while Turkey does have share identity with the ex-communist states in the Balkans and the Caucasus, it does not belong to these regions either. Turkey has always been regarded as belonging to the 'other' in these regions.

Thus, its geographical location contributes to its paradoxical relations with Europe. A very brief summary of Anthony Giddens' classification of nation-states is helpful for understanding the role of geopolitics from a different perspective. Giddens lists four different types of nation-states: classical, colonised, post-colonial, and modernising.¹⁷ I thought he would place Turkey in modernising group, but he considers Turkey to be a *Classical* nation-state, which refers to mainly the European states originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Giddens argues that "[n]ot all nation-states that can be placed in the classical type were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those set up in Europe and around the

margins of Europe following the World Wars (including ex-imperial states like Austria or Turkey) belong in this category.”¹⁸ Thus the main reason for considering Turkey among the classical nation-states is its geographical closeness to Europe, ‘around the margins of Europe’, as Giddens describes it. This is also a key factor in creating an ‘identity crisis’ for Turkey. With the Treaty of Paris in 1856 the Ottoman Empire had been accepted into the European system without being part of it, and it seems that the new Turkish Republic inherited this historically ambiguous status. More importantly, Turkish-European relations are based on misperceptions, which the third factor of my analysis.

3. The politics of exclusion and misperception between Turkey and European states

The Ottoman Empire had refused to take part in European international society and to observe European international law until it was in decline in the nineteenth century. When the Empire was inducted into European international society in 1856 it was no longer in a position to enforce its own Islamic rules in external relations.¹⁹ On the contrary, the Empire had to accept the requirements of international society like other major European states. After 1856, legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire’s membership in European international society depended on changing its anachronistic Islamic character in order both to survive and to be part of European society. There had been three important requirements of being a member of this society: a) to prove the secular character of the state; b) to accept modern arguments on the principle of nationality, or of national self-determination; c) to observe European international law. Therefore, the transformation of the Ottoman socio-political structure to the European model of secular nation-state was an answer to the state’s ‘identity crisis,’ which itself was a consequence of the Ottoman

Empire's integration into European international society in the nineteenth century. The movements of the Young Ottomans and the Young Turks were, in fact, different responses to the 'identity crisis' of the Ottoman state and to the modernisation of the Empire. Their proposed ideologies, pan-Ottomanism, pan-Islamism, and pan-Turkism, did not in themselves provide an answer to modernise the state in accordance with the European norms.

In the course of Turkey's relations with the European states in the twentieth century, one can argue that the Turkish Republic has not diverged much from the Ottoman Empire's status since the seventeenth century. Turkey still wants to overcome its 'otherness' in the society of the European states and be accepted as an equal member of this society as their predecessors aimed centuries ago. When a peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy League was signed at Carlowitz in 1699, as the first peace signed by a defeated Ottoman Empire with victorious Christian powers its implication was very clear: the Ottomans had to learn new concepts and new ways of dealing with the European states, i.e. a new understanding of diplomacy, mediation and international law.²⁰ Interestingly enough, exactly three-hundred-years later when the European Union nominated Turkey as an official candidate for membership in the Helsinki Summit of 1999, some Turkish politicians and newspaper commentaries declared it the most important event in the history of Turkish Republic. When the European Union laid out the conditions under which Turkey could become a member of the club, this sense of self-congratulation disappeared. Suggestions such as granting all citizens the equal right to cultural expression and practice their religion, repeal limits on free speech and expression of ideas, resolve social conflicts by conciliation, and limit the power of the military in government and society were some of the conditions that could not be acceptable by Turkish authorities.²¹ From Turkey's perspective, whatever Turks and Turkey do we cannot satisfy the requirements of

European international society. From European states' perspective, Turkey cannot fulfill the expectations of western world.

European perceptions of Turkey have always focused on two important issues: democracy and the role of military. The first misperception is that Europe does not want to acknowledge that "Turkey has a long history of democracy, stretching back to the first Ottoman Parliament of 1877/78. Democracy emerged, if fitfully, after the Young Turk revolution of 1908 against the autocracy of the Sultan Abdul Hamid's regime. It was re-established, if in theory more than in fact, in 1923."²² As we all know, the EU Commission Reports after 1999 always conclude that, 'Though it is beginning to make progress in some areas, Turkey does not yet meet the Copenhagen political criteria.' The European Parliament covers the same ground as the Commission, but has hardly a good word to say for Turkey's efforts so far [without going into the details of the pointed criticisms they can be summarised on the following major issues: human rights, the place of the National Security Council in Turkish politics, the Kurdish issue, non-compliance with judgements of the European Court of Human rights etc, the list goes on]. Turkey has to make serious efforts to convince Europe that it has some experience with democracy despite its problems. I am not arguing that Turkey is a fully-fledged democracy but historically it does have some experience of democracy compared to other Muslim countries. The European Parliament is not, perhaps, fully aware that every liberal democracy has its problems, including those in the EU, but Turkey would certainly seem to have more than most. They should not forget the fact that Turkey has nevertheless managed to maintain a fair degree of democracy through a period of rapid socio-political and economic change. The second misperception is related to the role of military in Turkey. The role of army is easy to understand for Turks as the guardians of democracy. But it is very difficult to explain to Europeans. The European

experience does not have any notion of a democratic state, which can be saved by the military. In Europe, the military generally accepted that it has at best only a marginal role to play in politics.” But the Turkish modern state-builders were soldiers, and Turkish democracy has been corrected by military coups. Thus, for Europeans it is very difficult to understand the role of military in Turkey.²³

Turkey’s perception of Europe is also problematic. On the one hand, Turks believe that the EU is a Christian Club and whatever they do it is not good enough to be a member. European states have not appreciated Turkey’s unique experience as a modernizing secular ‘European’ country despite its different socio-cultural identity and religion. From Turkey’s perspective, its commitment to Europe for the last two centuries faced with criticism, deeply-rooted hostility and exclusion. The second misperception is what I call is Sevres syndrome in Turkish politics and history. At the end of the First World War, the policies of the Allies against the Turkish people created a distrust towards the West. Turkish leaders became very sensitive about sovereignty in the early years of the Turkish Republic. This sensitivity has influenced Turkish politicians in their protection of Turkey’s territorial integrity ever since. The Turks have never forgotten that the Allies wanted to create independent Armenian and Kurdish states in Anatolia. As a result of this misperception, every time the West interfered in the Kurdish or Armenian questions the Turks feel they are being haunted by the shadow of the Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies in 1920. For example, in 1995, when the media was preoccupied with the Kurdish question because of the events in northern Iraq, the comment of the Turkish president, Süleyman Demirel, was that ‘the West wanted to implement the Treaty of Sèvres’.²⁴

Concluding Remarks

Both sides have to overcome with their misperceptions and distrust towards the each other, and to understand the new dynamics of globalisation and regionalism.

For Turkey, The reconciliation with its own history, region and identity is necessary. Turkey has to redefine its identity as a Eurasian and Euro-Mediterranean country as well as Middle Eastern.²⁵ As a matter of identity and interests, Turkey has to have a more orientation between East and West. As a Muslim country, Turkey has to ensure that the war on terrorism after 9/11 does not become a ‘civilizational’ struggle between Islam and West. As a European country, Turkey should carefully consider its interest in supporting US-led actions in the Middle East with its own and European counterparts’ interests.

For Europe, If the EU wants to pursue an active policy towards the Middle East it needs Turkey’s assistance in understanding the Muslim societies of this region. “Oil supplies and markets for its products are the key elements in Europe’s relationship with the Middle East. Both of these depend on stability in the region, which is one of the reasons that the EU has committed substantial sums in assistance, in particular to support the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.” The EU itself knows that it has a very important and economic role to play in the Middle East, but not a very influential political one, which can be implemented by Turkey.

In sum, this requires the inclusion of Turkey and the task of re-defining European identity. When Turkey’s candidacy for membership was finally confirmed after a process of 36 years the Eurocrats’ minds were not clear about Turkey. “The idea that the EU cannot admit a Muslim country to its ranks may still form part of the semi hidden agenda of many Western European politicians and have some effect on public opinion. Even among themselves, Western

Europeans are quite divided on what sort of identity they want for the EU. Should it be a full political union, with a stronger degree of implied cultural homogeneity, or a looser group restricted primarily to the economic sphere? This debate within the EU has great relevance to the future of its relations with Turkey.”²⁶

Europe has to continue to appreciate Turkey’s difference, as it did in the last Eurovision contest.

But, Turkey has also to understand that ‘Euro-vision’ is indeed a contest but not only in signing!

¹ Ferenc A. Vali, *Bridge Across the Bosphorus*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1971, p.44

² Duygu Bazoglu Sezer, ‘Turkey in the New Security Environment in the Balkan and Black Sea Region,’ in *Turkey Between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power*, Vojtech Mastny and R. Craig Nation, eds., Colorado, Westview Press, 1996, p. 71

³ Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, 242

⁴ Thomas Naff, ‘The Ottoman Empire and the European States System’, in H. Bull & A. Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p.143

⁵ Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, London, MacMillan, 1984, p.34

⁶ The conceptual pair of ‘self/other’ allows a simple dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to emerge during the process collective identity formation. Iver B. Neumann, ‘Self and Other in International Relations,’ *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.2, No. 2, 1996, p.141.

⁷ This differentiation is based on Hedley Bull’s classification of system and society in the International Relations literature. According Bull, “[a] *system of states* (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole.” Hedley Bull, *Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, London, MacMillan, Second Edition, 1995, p.9. Furthermore, in his analysis, the definition of international society refers to a society of sovereign states. “*A society of states* (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.” He then argues that the members of an international society are bound by certain common interests, common values and certain rules. “At the same time they co-operate in the working of institutions such as the forms of procedures of international law, the machinery of diplomacy and general international organisation, and the customs conventions of war.” *Ibid.*, p.13

⁸ Naff, *op. cit.*, p.145

⁹ F. R. Bridge and R. Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System 1815-1914*, London, Longman, 1980, p.3

¹⁰ See Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, ‘The Other in European Self-definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society,’ *Review of International Studies*, Vol.17, No.4, 1991, pp.327-46

¹¹ Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, Harmonds Worth, Penguin, 1978, p.302

¹² See Gearoid O Tuathail and Simon Dalby, eds., *Rethinking Geopolitics*, London, Routledge, 1998

¹³ Philip Robins, *Turkey and the Middle East*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991, p.3

¹⁴ Metin Tamkoç, *The Warrior Diplomats: Guardians of the National Security and Modernisation of Turkey*, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1976, p.71

¹⁵ Christopher Clapham, ‘Comparative Foreign Policy and Developing States’, in Christopher Clapham, ed., *Foreign Policy-making in Developing States: A Comparative Approach*, Westmead, Saxon House, 1977, p.166

¹⁶ Robins, *op. cit.*, p.11

¹⁷ Giddens, *Nation-State*, *op. cit.*, pp.269

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.270

¹⁹ Robert Jackson argues that by the Treaty of Paris, “Turkey repudiated its Islamic traditions in external relations and thereby contributed to the universalization of the states-system.” Jackson, *op. cit.*, p.62

²⁰ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002, p.17-18

²¹ Stephen Kinzer, *Crescent and Star: Turkey Between Two Worlds*, New York, Farrar Straus, 2001, p.175

²² Clement Dodd, ‘Democracy and the European Union,’ in *Turkish Transformation: New Century- New Challenges*, London, The Eothen Press, 2002, p. 241

²³ Dodd, pp.260-61

²⁴ Doğu Perinçek, *Avrasya Seçeneği: Türkiye İçin Bağımsız Dış Politika*, İstanbul, Kaynak Yayınları, 1996, p.69

²⁵ David Lennon, ‘The European Union and the Middle East,’ in *Europe in the New Century: Visions of an Emerging Superpower*, Robert J. Guttman, ed., London, Lynne Rienner, 2001, p. 115

²⁶ William Hale and Gamze Avcı, ‘Turkey and the European Union: The Long Road to Membership,’ in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirisci, eds., London, Lynne Rienner, 2001, p. 42